

Special Spotlight

Jack Swerling: Turning the Wheels of Justice

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It can be best said that people learn from adversity. However, Jack Bruce Swerling doesn't just learn from it—he thrives on it.

What's more, he grew up with it. As a result, Swerling has become one of South Carolina's leading criminal defense attorneys—and, one of the most prominent.

Upon first looking at Swerling's 6-foot, 5-inch frame, looking at him in the eye and hearing the deep, bellowing voice, one thing comes to the minds of many—intimidation.

However, there's more to the 44-year-old Columbia resident than meets the eye. While he has acquired a reputation for being tough and firm, Swerling is better known for his compassion, his willingness to help those in trouble, particularly blacks and other minorities.

Perhaps that's why he comes highly recommended, considering his minority clientele comprises about 60 percent of all his cases.

Still, he had to learn those lessons of sensitivity early and often, even while growing up as a son of Jewish descendants in New York City.

"A lot of my background has helped me to be sensitive to the plight of minorities, the plight of the disadvantaged and oppressed," Swerling recalled. "We grew up in a neighborhood where there were a lot of Polish, Jewish, Italians and blacks."

A few years later, he and his family moved to Belleville, N.J., a small town located outside of Newark. Throughout his early life the family would often make trips to his uncle's farm in Pennsylvania.

It was there that his dreams of going into medicine soon grew. "I had wanted to be a veterinarian, but I didn't want

to be a cat and dog veterinarian," Swerling recalled. "My uncle owned a farm in Pennsylvania, and when I would visit I always worked with big cattle."

In fact, he liked veterinary work so much, he decided to pursue it as a career.

After graduation Swerling enrolled at Clemson in the fall of 1964, but while there he would run into problems. First, he had to deal with the pressures of being a minority student in a small town, Southern school that had admitted its first black only the previous year.

"To me it was a shock. I had never considered it until I heard some of the students refer to me as a 'Yankee' and a 'Jew,'" Swerling said. "Those were hard adjustment problems, and I really became sensitive to it. But, considering the type of school it was, Clemson made the transition as well as I'd ever seen."

His second problem dealt with his academics. A mandatory chemistry course during his sophomore year proved to be such a problem to Swerling, he wound up becoming frustrated. He ultimately dropped out of Clemson but was persuaded by his family to re-enter.

And so he did—this time as an economics major. Two years later, he graduated with a bachelor's degree in the field and returned to NYC to work as an insurance claims adjuster.

It was then that his life reached the turning point. As part of his work, Swerling had to spend time in the courts, but he ultimately wound up falling in love with the way the system worked.

"I really liked my job, but it was one that had no future," Swerling recalled. "Plus, one of my bosses called me aside one day and told me, 'This is not a company for Jewish people'—that was an



eye-opener."

Swerling then began to look toward a career in law and a law school that would afford him with the opportunity. Again, he looked to South Carolina, only this time he came upon Columbia. It didn't hurt to know his new wife, the former Erika Helfer, was from Columbia. Plus, he had become accustomed to the way of life in the South.

Swerling enrolled at the University of South Carolina law school in 1970; three years and several activities and honors later, he received his juris doctorate, graduating in the upper 15 percent of his class.

Afterward, he wanted to go back to New York—again, but he saw a better opportunity in Columbia, so he stayed. He hasn't looked back since, after more than 2,000 criminal cases.

"I never had any reservations about going into criminal law once I started. It was something that came natural," Swerling said. "I never liked one side having an advantage over the other, and a defense lawyer has to make sure those things don't happen."

In his 17-year career, he has been called upon to represent defendants in high-profile cases. While many would back away from the challenge of representing a Pee Wee Gaskins, as he did in 1982,

Swerling said he welcomes it.

"When you defend people, it's an unpopular thing. Through the years, I've received my share of death threats, and, yes, my family has had to take some heat," Swerling said. "Still, if you hold your head up high, your image will not be tarnished."

"Besides, the people who matter understand the situation; those who don't understand, they don't matter to me," he said.

Despite the troubles and tribulations, Swerling admits his life as a defense attorney has been all worthwhile. He has even found time to write for several literary journals and serve as an adjunct professor at USC.

The influence has been so dominant, the Swerlings' two children, Bryan (16) and Stephanie (13), have both indicated they want to be lawyers.

"It just takes a lot of work—and a lot of luck. You also have to treat everybody with respect," Swerling said. "The government, when it's unchecked, can cause problems for people, and you have to be willing to tell it like it is."

"These defendants, as much as they may be guilty or innocent, they're also people—and they have their rights. Those are the types of things that keep our society free."